

The 2014 Wichita-Sedgwick Continuum of Care (WSC-CoC) Homeless Point-in-Time count was 631 individuals, of whom 83 were unsheltered. Of the total count, 107 were chronically homeless, and 441 were therefore situationally homeless. Additionally, there were over 2,000 children in Wichita Public Schools who received services through the McKinney-Vento Homeless Program during the 2012-2013 school year.

Background

The definition of homelessness is any individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; will imminently lose their primary nighttime residence; children and unaccompanied youth under age 25 who are sharing the housing of other persons; and persons fleeing domestic violence situations. Homelessness also includes children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reasons. The homeless can be divided into two separate populations: chronic homeless and situationally homeless. Chronic homelessness is defined by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) as an unaccompanied homeless individual with a disabling condition who has either been continuously homeless for a year or more or had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years. The situationally homeless, as the term implies, are homeless due to situational issues, including domestic violence and economic conditions. Finally, there is emergency homelessness, which is a subset of situational homelessness. Emergency homelessness is often the result of domestic violence. The strategies employed to combat situational homelessness are somewhat different than strategies to address chronic homelessness, as are the challenges and costs.

In 1994, homeless advocates from the nonprofit, private, and public sectors formed the Community Council on Homelessness Advocacy to provide leadership for the issue of area homelessness. In 2004, the United Way of the Plains utilized a Department of Housing and Urban Development grant of \$254,000 to increase and improve technology access to the local homeless population and address software compatibility issues for a Homelessness Management Information System. United Methodist Open Door opened a new homeless resource and referral center in 2012, which was paid for by local fundraising efforts that leveraged significant federal dollars.

Situational homelessness has been addressed in the past by stakeholders including the Wichita Children's Home, Open Door, Salvation Army, Interfaith Inn, Catholic Charities, the YWCA, and downtown churches. Emergency shelters and temporary housing are eligible for HUD grants, and have been the primary public and social service response to homelessness. There are gaps in service as the number of temporary housing units for adults and families (not unaccompanied youths and children) has decreased by 63%, from 65 to 24, as a consequence of decreased federal funding.

Strategies to Address Homelessness

A new approach to address chronic homelessness began on August 9, 2006, when the City of Wichita, Sedgwick County, and United Way of the Plains convened the Taskforce to End Chronic Homelessness (TECH). In 2008, TECH submitted the "Plan to End Chronic Homelessness" to the City Council. The plan identified the need for additional local resources to finance permanent housing options and support services, more widespread utilization of a Homeless Management Information System, and the Housing

First approach. TECH found that permanent housing provides a more effective alternative to end chronic homelessness than emergency shelters and transitional housing, which are more suitable for situational homelessness.

Since 2009, shelter options for the homeless have expanded beyond traditional emergency shelters and transitional housing, to include permanent housing through the Housing First program which receives funding for rent and utilities from the City of Wichita and Sedgwick County, program administration by the City, and funding for case management from outside agencies. Housing First provides chronically homeless people with immediate access to apartment housing. TECH established a first year goal to provide permanent housing for up to 64 chronically homeless people based upon a previous Point-in-Time count.

In 2013, the Police Department's Homelessness Outreach Team (HOT) pilot was initiated, which utilizes non-traditional policing methods to address instances of homelessness. The program began in 2013, and has connected local homeless with community services and support, helped update the relevant local ordinance, placed 128 individuals in permanent or transitional housing through Housing First and other programs, and provided an alternative to jail.

There has been community collaboration toward the goal of eliminating homelessness, as well as progress toward implementing the TECH plan. However, the 2013 Point-in-Time count demonstrates that homelessness remains an issue, as the count has remained steady. Further challenges stem from a reduction in temporary housing units, though there has been an increase in the number of unsheltered individuals in the annual Point-in-Time count, and the Wichita Public Schools' count indicates a significant number of families experiencing situational homelessness.

Alternatives

Programs to eliminate chronic homelessness, such as the Housing First program, could be expanded to address the current estimated unmet need. Housing First is financed based upon a past census goal of 64 chronically homeless persons, but the program has an annual retention rate of 81% and can only make about 12 housing units available per year to accommodate new referrals. Assuming there are 107 additional chronically homeless persons, expanding the Housing First program to shelter the total estimated chronically homeless population would cost an additional \$642,000 annually.

The HOT program could be utilized as a permanent strategy for reducing both chronic and transitional homelessness. The three officers involved in the pilot project were essentially diverted from normal patrol duties. To allow these officers to permanently focus on the homelessness issue, an estimated \$300,000 annually (with additional equipment costs estimated at \$100,000 initially) would be necessary. This would fund three additional commissioned positions, as well as vehicles and support costs.

Reducing or eliminating transitional housing issues is more complicated, with many different options. Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) funds received from HUD are specifically used for emergency shelter, homeless prevention, and rapid re-housing. These limited grant funds (\$225,915 is available in grant year 2014-2015) could be supplemented with City funds using the same network of providers.

The City also provides both a Public Housing program (providing affordable public housing units) and a voucher program to provide rent assistance (Section 8) for private sector apartments. These are both federally funded through HUD, and are not geared to specifically address homelessness, but rather to provide more affordable housing to those in need. Both have waiting lists of clients due to limited federal funding. However, either model could be supplemented with City funds. Rental vouchers could be provided and funded by the City similar to the Section 8 program. An average of \$5,100 in vouchers is provided annually per client. Assuming there are 441 situationally homeless persons, it would cost around \$2.3 million to provide housing annually with a voucher system. However, most likely the cost would be lower since some of the 441 could be family units, and because transitionally homeless persons by definition may not require housing assistance for an entire year.

Creating additional public housing capacity would involve significant capital costs. Costs could vary considerably, depending on whether the units were dormitory style, cluster units, or individual units throughout the City. There would be significant City costs to administer and maintain any supplemental public housing units built. That cost is estimated at \$10,000 per housing unit annually.

Many would suggest that along with support of programs to help people who are homeless, equal attention should be paid to promoting stability among the poor who are housed and/or preventing families from becoming homeless. Strategies include providing job training, enhanced educational opportunities, and expansion of entry level jobs for placements.

Summary - Funding Gap

The City currently devotes sustainable resources towards homelessness issues. From the City General Fund, \$191,368 annually (matched with funds from Sedgwick County) is provided to the Housing First program for chronically homeless individuals, and this is ongoing. There is a significant amount of HUD funds utilized to provide affordable housing options, including around \$14 million in Section 8 voucher funds and around \$4 million annually to administer and maintain public housing units. These federal funds have been reduced in recent years, increasing administrative burdens for the City and reducing service levels. However, the programs are expected to remain intact into the future. The Police Department's HOT program has been funded by reallocating resources within the Police Department. There is not a permanent funding source for the HOT program; its continued sustainability will depend either on a permanent reallocation within the Police Department, or additional allocations of approximately \$300,000 annually from the General Fund.

Expanding the Housing First program to shelter the total number of chronically homeless would cost an additional \$642,000. However, the effectiveness of this approach would need to be analyzed by the Housing First partners, including Sedgwick County, before any additional funds are allocated. To address issues caused by affordability, depending on the strategy pursued, either Section 8 or Public Housing programs could be supplemented with City funds to provide affordable options for the homeless. Expanding a Section 8 model could cost as much as \$2.3 million annually in additional City funds, but would have the advantage of being a variable cost (matched to the level of situational homelessness) and it would avoid City capital costs. Alternatively, the City could construct additional housing units along the public housing model. Capital costs are difficult to estimate, depending on the type and

number of units built; however, presumably they would cost from \$4 million to \$10 million. In addition, maintenance and administration of additional public housing units would cost an estimated \$1 million to \$4 million each year, depending on the composition of the estimated 447 homeless persons.

An alternative toward investing proactively in Housing First, the HOT program, and additional transitional housing units would be letting current social service programs and informal arrangements meet housing and supportive services of homeless individuals. Though the direct costs would not necessarily be borne by the City of Wichita, a study in New York found that homeless people with serious mental illness received \$40,000 in annual public support, while a study in Portland, Oregon found that homeless people used either \$42,000 in annual public support if allowed to remain homeless or used \$26,000 in support if placed in permanent housing (resulting in \$16,000 in cost avoidance). Assuming the cost benefit multiplier is 2.7, then potentially the annual cost of a Housing First unit (\$6,000) is eliminating the need for \$16,000 in other public services costs. Likewise, it costs the City approximately \$51 per day to house a person in the County jail (or over \$18,000 on an annualized basis). To the extent that homelessness expenditures reduce arrests and incarceration, there is a potential payoff for additional homelessness operating expenditures.